

CIAOPR RS 312-75
Thai Politics in Transition

Approved For Release 2001/08/21 : CIA-RDP86T00608R000600170028-9

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Research Study

Thai Politics in Transition

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OPR 312
November 1975

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November 1975

NOTE: In the preparation of this study, the Office of Political Research consulted other offices of the Central Intelligence Agency. Their comments and suggestions were appreciated and used, but no attempt at formal coordination was undertaken. Comments would be welcomed by the author on Code 143, Ext. 5491.

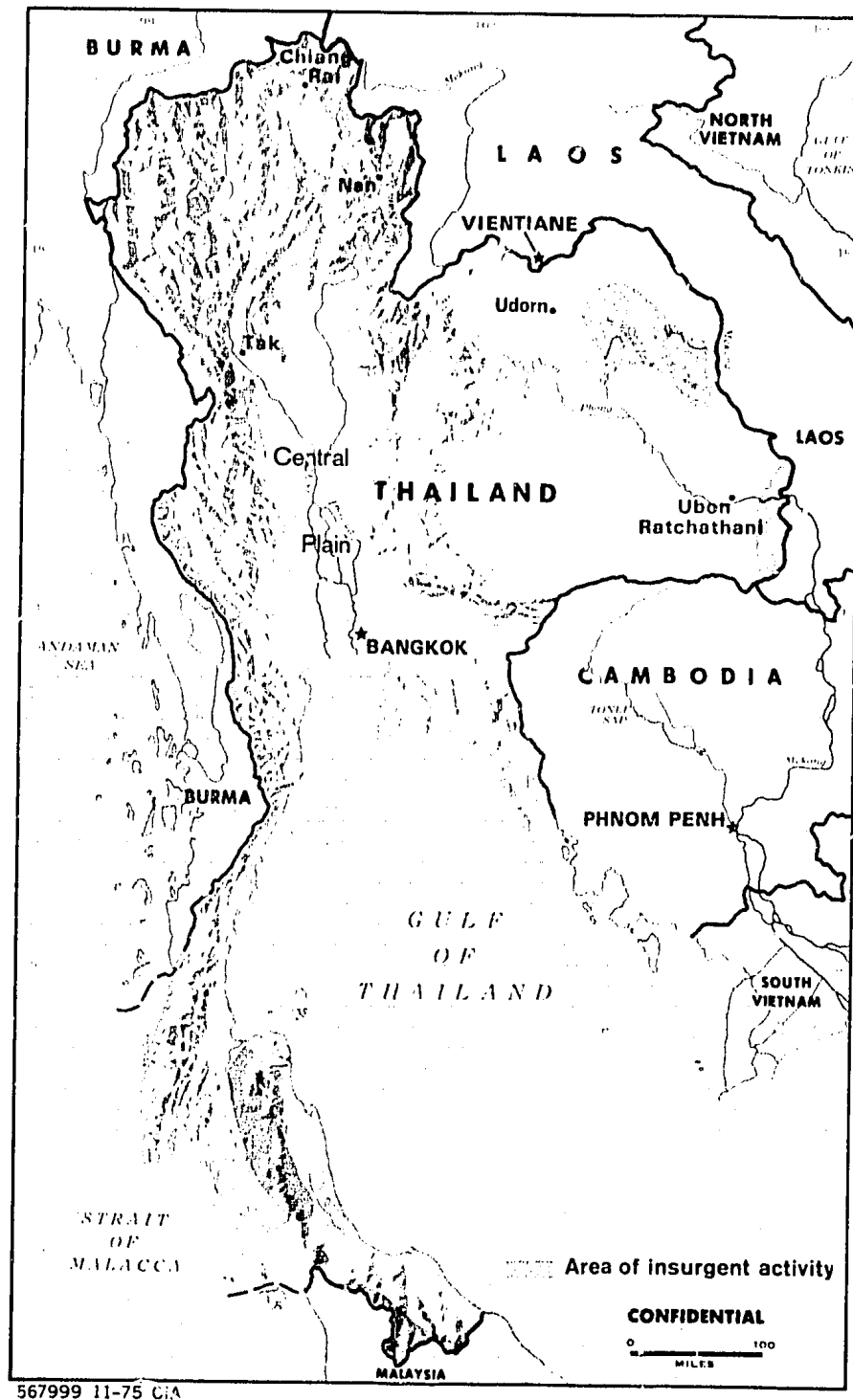
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NOTE

Thailand has been a remarkably stable and peacefully developing nation in an area that has seen chaotic change since the end of World War II. Like the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand has been in an accelerating process of transition, but has not suffered the disruptions that have plagued her neighbors. The cohesion of Thai society, a confident nationalism unshaken by colonial rule, and a peculiar skill in blunting or accommodating external threats have all contributed to easing the adjustment to modernization—an adjustment further facilitated by rising prosperity and generally tolerable economic conditions. Now Thai confidence has been shaken by the confluence of several trends; the ebb of American power and interest in the area which has undermined the foundations of Thailand's post-World War II foreign policy and raised the spectre of a greater communist threat, the strains of growing economic problems, the political impact of the erosion of traditional values and tolerances by the influx of Western (largely American) influence. This study attempts to identify major elements of stability and disequilibrium in Thailand today, and to suggest how these forces will affect Thailand's politics as well as its relations with the US.

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SUMMARY

Until recently, politics in Thailand were those typical of a traditional society—authoritarian, elitist, personalized—but largely free of many of the pressures that have generated unrest in other developing nations. The stability of the political and social structure rested essentially on a combination of factors:

- the pacific tenets of Buddhism, the national religion;
- the absence of colonial rule, which might have bred radical discontent,
- the delayed impact of modernization.

Of the nation's various social groups, only the military had the authority, leadership, and power to rule. Its domination of the government went almost unchallenged for more than 40 years.

Then, suddenly, in October 1973, military rule in Thailand collapsed, brought down by a combination of pressures it proved incapable of handling:

- the sudden surge of inflation and shortage of rice;
- the modification of the Cold War atmosphere, which made the arguments for authoritarian government less persuasive;
- a suddenly politicized student community.

The advent of civilian rule represents no crisp break with the past; traditional interest groups remain powerful. But new forces have appeared on the surface of Thai politics—student radicals, a more aggressive labor movement, a more restless peasantry—and these seem bound eventually to assert themselves more aggressively in the Thai political arena.

At the time of its inception, it seemed unlikely that the shaky new parliamentary system could long survive against the still strong and entrenched military. Yet, the new civilian regime not only has endured, but seems to have grown stronger and more secure in its rule.

- The Prime Minister's position has been reinforced by his political skill and by the absence of an alternative candidate as widely acceptable.
- The incipient leftist movement has lost public sympathy and is somewhat cowed by threats from the right.

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- The military seems willing to stay in the background—persuaded for the moment at least that its interests can be protected through alliances within the system, and reluctant, in any event, to be directly responsible should Thailand's "democratic experiment" fail.

What is the future direction of Thai politics? It will depend in large measure on how the major players—both new and traditional—see their roles on the Thai political stage and how effectively they carry them out.

- The military remains the most powerful political force and its actions clearly will be a prime determinant of Thailand's political future.
- The King is an important stabilizing factor. Though aloof from day to day politics, he retains the potential for effective intervention in an immediate, short-term crisis, and could again be valuable in defusing a dangerous situation.

Structured pressure groups outside the official bureaucracy are an alien notion in Thailand, but there is a rising level of political activity among student, labor and farm groups.

- Student pressure has been diluted since October 1973, but still plays an influential role in Thai politics.
- Organized labor is resistant to political manipulation and focuses its efforts more on job-related, rather than political, issues. But the continuation of this apolitical trend will depend on the government's responsiveness to labor's interests.
- Rural discontent is a more worrisome, if not yet critical, problem to the Thai; yet without the pressure of a crisis, the government is unlikely to take effective remedial action.

Over the long run, it is more questionable whether parliamentary government can survive. A number of factors weigh against its chances:

- the lack of basic commitment to its conceptual underpinnings;
- the widespread skepticism that it can effectively cope with Thailand's problems;
- the growing incidence of violence and crime that is associated in people's minds with the more open and contentious political atmosphere.

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Future Thai foreign policy seems more likely to be influenced by the international environment than by the complexion of the regime in power. Any regime is likely to be more demanding of a greater *quid pro quo* in its future dealings with the US and less willing to rely on a close bilateral relationship. In practical terms this may mean:

- a more independent and sometimes adversary position in international forums;
- increasing priority to regional relations;
- a greater emphasis on economic issues in US-Thai relations.

A dramatically increased threat from Thailand's communist neighbors could divert these trends, and probably would draw the military back into a more forceful role. But, at this time, such a scenario does not appear likely.

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DISCUSSION

I. THE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL STRUCTURE:
CONSERVATIVE AND BUREAUCRATIC

Mass political stirrings have come slowly to Thailand—a conservative and orderly society that has reflected the strong influence of Buddhism and an agrarian way of life. Politics have been typical of traditional societies—authoritarian, elitist, personalized—but Thailand has been largely free of many of the pressures that have generated unrest in many other developing nations. Ethnic divisions, land tenancy and population pressures have not been significant problems. There has been no colonial rule to generate radical political movements; the processes of change have been administered by Thai, rather than by alien rulers, with the consequent preservation of traditional practices.

The acceptance of authoritarian rule and the general political apathy of the public have been reinforced by Thai culture. Buddhism teaches the acceptance of one's place in society as earned by one's behavior in earlier life cycles. Power or a superior status reflects earlier virtue and justifies itself. Violence is justified only by extreme provocation, a belief reflected in the general avoidance of political violence and the fact that, until 1973 at least, Thai coups were largely bloodless. Moreover, the modernization process has only recently begun to be felt in Thailand.* Indeed, many

*The unchanging nature of Thai society between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries has been commented on by several scholars. James C. Ingram (*Economic Change in Thailand*) noted in the mid-1950s:

"The Thai population has largely remained in agriculture, and has neither improved techniques nor increased the proportion of capital to labor. Moreover, most change in the economy as a whole has been in volume rather than in kind. New methods have not been used, new products have not been developed. No product of any importance (besides rubber) is exported today that was not exported in 1850."

Since this was written in the mid-1950s, however, the Thai have developed a more diverse range of export products—including corn, sugar, and soybeans.

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of the political pressures now emerging can be traced to expanded communication, education, and interdependence with the world economy—major elements in the modernization process.

The politically active segment of Thai society has frequently been described as a three-tiered pyramid—only a handful of men at the apex who dominate the structure, a broader band of military officers, aristocrats and powerful businessmen below who play a supporting role, and a considerably larger base of educated and politically-oriented citizens (perhaps two percent of the adult population) who are on the fringes of the political action but not really effective participants. The political system has changed surprisingly little since the 1932 coup ended rule by absolute monarchy. The tradition of bureaucracy-dominated government that has since pertained is so firmly entrenched that it is difficult to foresee its significant erosion in the near future. Understanding this system and what its impact on decision-making has been is essential to understanding where the locus of power lies in Thai politics and in sensing the pressures and interests that generate policies.

The system of centralized bureaucratic rule was already well established under the absolute monarchy. The 1932 coup introduced a facade of Western-style institutions of representative government, but, in fact, the monarchy was simply replaced as ruler of the bureaucracy by an expanded group of political actors from the bureaucracy itself. The coup participants—senior military and civil service officers—were not so much interested in reforming the system as in removing the extended royal family as an obstacle to their own advancement to the top. The education of the coup leaders at European universities and military schools was reflected in the outer trappings of post-coup governments and in the use of constitutions as cloaks of legitimacy over successive regimes, but

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the concept of representative government was too alien to penetrate below the surface.

The locus of power has been (and remains) the Cabinet, natural successor to the King's council, which has drawn its power from bureaucratic constituencies within the civil service and, more predominantly, within the military rather than from popular support or interest groups outside the government. The legislative assemblies, lacking such constituencies, have never had the power to sustain any challenge to the Cabinet's predominance, although their basic legitimacy as an institution has never been questioned. Thai regimes have viewed the Assembly's role as that of trusted counselors [redacted] and when an adversary relationship has developed, the Assembly's temerity has been short-lived. 25X6

The legislature's weakness is due in large part to the absence of an effective political party system. Political parties are basically alien to the Thai bureaucratic culture. Only one, the Democrat Party, which draws its support largely from the Bangkok area, has existed for any extensive period. While other parties have made fleeting appearances, the Democrats have survived since 1946 as a persistent critic of successive regimes. The bright young men coming out of the top universities have usually opted for the bureaucracy rather than the risks and futility of party politics. This tendency was reflected in the unusual caliber of the hand-picked interim assembly that served briefly after the government fell in 1973; many of its members came from the bureaucracy and chose to go back into the government rather than run for election in 1975.

Political loyalty centers around personalized cliques based upon loyalty to the leader and not to an idea or viewpoint. This system evolves out of the patron-client syndrome that underlies Thai society, a natural falling into place of a superior-inferior relationship with attendant obligations on each side. In Japan, such loyalties once established are a fairly durable tie and a source of social and political stability. In Thailand, however, patron-client relationships are transitory—clients constantly reassessing the advantages and seeking more beneficial patrons. Such maneuvering has been a major cause of the weakness of Thai political parties

and successive legislative assemblies; parties or voting blocs were never stable but were constantly losing members to a higher bidder.

The Establishment of Military Rule

With civilian influence so fragmented and undisciplined, the military has come to play a compelling role in Thai politics. Military dominance emerged almost immediately after the 1932 coup when conservative civilian bureaucrats broke with the more liberal reformers to ally with the military leaders. Henceforth, military support remained an essential condition for political success, although military officers did not monopolize the leadership before World War II. A brief period of civilian representative government followed the war but collapsed through corruption and infighting. The 1947 coup, which installed a military regime, introduced the group of Thai that would dominate the political scene until 1973—the 1947 Coup Group.* Military-dominated regimes turned over with frequency—at least until 1957 when Field Marshall Sarit Thamarat began a period of uninterrupted rule which lasted until 1963 when he died and was peacefully succeeded by his deputy, General Thanom Kittakachorn. But changes in national leadership throughout the 1947-1972 period represented nothing so much as personal rivalries within a coup group rather than substantive policy disputes, or the introduction of new political forces.

The military regimes did not completely freeze out civilian influence. In fact, the civilian bureaucracy has been a constant presence throughout successive military regimes and has exercised significant influence on policies outside the military's particular interests. Sarit, in particular, gave loose rein to the civilian technocrats who crafted Thailand's development policies that launched the modernization process in the late 1950s, although his successors tended to ignore them. These technocrats—now senior bureaucrats—have not been advocates of liberal reforms; on the contrary, they have tended to see an authoritarian regime as providing the stability conducive to economic development.

*The major political cliques in Thailand have been formed around coup attempts and (when successful) are identified with the coup—i.e., the "1932 Coup Group," the "1947 Coup Group," the "1957 Coup Group," etc.

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Clique politics in both military and civilian circles are fueled by personality and money. The leader who is gathering support reinforces the loyalty of his clients with the largesse of his patronage. This is more than a simple political pay-off, but a moral obligation strongly entrenched in Thailand's societal rules. This side of the patron-client syndrome—the obligations of the patron—has had several practical ramifications. Successive Thai regimes, despite the absence of opposition pressure, have shown a sense of paternalistic commitment to the nation's welfare. One reflection has been the increasing promotion of development projects—education, irrigation, and the like—a task made easier in the past by the relative wealth of the country and the generous flow of foreign aid.

On a more personalized basis, the need for money or lucrative opportunities to attract and reward political supporters has reinforced the exploitation of the wealthy Chinese community, which controls virtually all commercial activities in Thailand. As in most Southeast Asian countries, the Overseas Chinese community in Thailand is resented and has bought political protection from the establishment that controls the government. As the economy grew more sophisticated in the 1950s, this rather loosely structured exploitation/protection arrangement grew into a more complex superstructure of new corporations which included Thai officials on the boards of directors. These formal business alliances offered to the Sino-Thai longer-range security and to the Thai officials the means to further their own careers.* Thai military leaders generally have not come from wealthy backgrounds. They have made their fortunes through the system that rewards the political control they enjoy; such a vested interest in preserving that system has made the military's power that much harder to dilute.

*Senior Thai generals, such as former Prime Minister Thanom Kittakachorn and former Deputy Prime Minister Praphat amassed enormous fortunes through their membership on corporate boards and their ability to channel government expenditures. Field Marshall Sarit's fortune was legendary. Police General Phao, former Director General of the Police Department (and whose widow is still active behind the scenes in Thai politics) was a director of more than 26 companies. General Krit, the current commander of the armed forces, publicly shed the shares he held in about 50 companies (although they could easily have been transferred to relatives or close associates), but his campaign donations for the 1975 elections and subsequent vote buying in the Assembly have been substantial.

Another factor that has contributed to the continuance of authoritarian government in post-war Thailand has been the continuing threat from its communist neighbors. The two previous attempts to establish parliamentary government—in 1945 when a discredited wartime regime that had cooperated with the Japanese had to be replaced with one more acceptable to the victorious allies, and from 1969 to 1971, when the Thanom regime was under pressure to broaden its political base but was not willing to concede any significant attenuation of power—clearly failed because the civilian politicians challenged the powers and prerequisites of the military. But the international climate of the times—the growing perception of communist intentions in the late 1940s and the impact of American retrenchment in 1971—made the military take-overs more palatable to the politically-concerned public, who tended to agree that the fractious, unproductive civilian politicians were less competent to meet a serious threat to the Kingdom. Those who disagreed were too weak, disorganized and cowed to offer effective opposition.

II. OCTOBER 1973 — THE COLLAPSE OF MILITARY RULE

The ease with which parliamentary government was abolished in 1971 disguised the fissures that had been developing in the foundations of military rule in Thailand. The student demonstrations of October 1973 that brought down the military regime were a break in the chain of military-inspired coups that had represented nothing more than factional infighting. New forces played significant roles, and the public was apparently stirred out of its traditional apathy by genuine sympathy for the students' campaign against the government leaders. The military—traditional power-broker without challenge—seemed incapable of dealing with the growing disorder and unprecedented violence, and ultimately acquiesced in the departure of the Prime Minister, General Thanom Kittakachorn, his deputy and regime strong-man, General Praphat Charusatien, and Thanom's son (and Praphat's son-in-law) Colonel Narong Kittakachorn.

The pressures that led to the fall of the Thanom/Praphat regime were fueled by a series of fortuitous events. These occurred in the context of growing sentiment among the Thai elite that the traditional

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polity that had been tolerated (with some cynicism) for so long simply was no longer suitable for coping with the country's contemporary problems. The overriding complaint against the regime was its failure to deal effectively with the growing domestic problems plaguing the country. In contrast to a successful foreign policy that was carefully exploring a more balanced relationship with its communist neighbors, its performance at home failed to ease the serious economic problems that were increasingly mobilizing groups against the regime. Worldwide inflation, an increasing money supply at home, and a significant drop in rice production led by mid-1972 to rates of inflation unprecedented since the post-war period. Government efforts to manage through price controls on rice led to shortages in the cities and riots in the countryside—unique in Thai experience—while labor unrest added a further disruptive note. Public disillusionment with the regime's performance was not abated by the outbreak of public quarreling and mutual recrimination among government leaders. The impression created was not of a confident government that knew what it was doing but of a fumbling, anachronistic leadership at a loss when faced with the non-military problems of the 1970s.

The regime's fumbling coincided with the sudden political activism of Thailand's student community. While the government tolerated the initial student protests in late 1972 against new political controls on the judiciary and quietly encouraged the student campaign against the growing Japanese economic presence in Thailand, tensions grew sharper in the following year. A series of incidents highlighting government corruption and its seeming incapacity to deal with the country's problems were exploited by the growing student movement. But it was student agitation for a new constitution that led to a final and violent confrontation in October.

The arrest of several students, intellectuals, and politicians generated ballooning support for the student's demands; the amount of support took everyone by surprise, including the students themselves. The unprecedented violence that erupted shocked the country and was the regime's undoing. Many military commanders expressed their unwillingness to join the government forces fighting the students. After consulting with the King, the recently-appointed Army Commander, Krit Siwara, refused the regime's orders to commit reinforcements.



Figure 1. Students bearing body of a fellow student killed by Army troops during October 1973 protests.

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The King's role in the demise of the Thanom/Praphat regime emerged, in part, from the unique relationship he had developed with the Thai students. The King has long paid a great deal of attention to the students, and while advocating that they work within the system, encouraged their pressure for political reform. In the week prior to the outbreak of violence in October 1973, the King actively tried to defuse the situation—counseling the students against violence on the one hand, and successfully urging the political leaders to release the 13 student demonstrators whose detention was aggravating student unrest. He apparently later gave protection to several of the student leaders who were reportedly in danger of re-arrest and possible execution. The King was unable to prevent the violence that ultimately erupted, but his support of Krit's refusal to use additional force against the students left Thanom and Praphat's position untenable and force their departure.

A New Era?

The downfall of the Thanom regime undoubtedly signalled the beginning of the end for the 1947 coup generation. Moreover, while it was no crisp break with the past, and the influence of entrenched bureaucratic interests persist, it signalled the advent of new forces on the surface of Thai politics

that seem bound eventually to percolate down into the system. Even if some of the democratic structures that now have gradually emerged should fail, it seems unlikely that Thailand will revert to the system of rule by military oligarchy just abandoned.

The constitution promulgated on 6 October 1974 is Thailand's ninth. But unlike earlier exercises, which were nothing more than ex post facto ratifications of regimes already established by coup



Figure 3. King Phumiphon signs the Constitution while Prime Minister Khukrit Pramot looks on.



Figure 2. The King and Queen talking with student demonstrators.

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d'etat, the current document preceded the election of a legitimate successor government and was a serious attempt to lay down guidelines for enduring democratic rule. It establishes a bicameral parliamentary system—the upper house (the Senate) of the National Assembly appointed by the King and the lower house (the House of Representatives) elected by universal suffrage. The prime minister must be an elected member of the lower house, and at least half of the Cabinet must be from the House or Senate.

The ascendancy of the civilians is evident in several areas. Under the Thanom/Praphat regime, active military officers headed civilian bureaucracies. The rubber-stamp National Assembly included 200 military and police officers in its 299-man membership. University rectors, appointed by the government and in a position to exercise control over students, faculty and curriculum, were often senior military officers, although reforms in this area were underway before the events of October. The new constitution proscribes active duty military personnel (or civil servants) from holding positions in the Cabinet or seats in the Assembly. Many members of the present Cabinet are retired military officers and undoubtedly maintain ties to the armed forces, but they are not, as before, part of the military command structure and subject to its authority.

With the abolition of military rule, a more free-wheeling political atmosphere developed. The interim assembly was not a truly representative body but nonetheless was aggressive and challenged the interim administration of Sanya Thammasak on several issues.* The press became aggressively outspoken—and often irresponsible. Student, farmer, and labor groups pressed their causes vigorously, and political parties emerged from the woodwork.

The old weaknesses of civilian politics in Thailand emerged with them—demonstrating once

*The interim Prime Minister, Sanya Thammasak, was a trusted counselor of the King and his personal choice. The King was instrumental in the selection of both the Constitution Drafting Committee and the National General Assembly (which in turn selected the interim legislative assembly) and gave direction and encouragement to its initial operation. The drafters of the new constitution tried to increase the monarchy's powers, but the assembly ultimately bowed to the King's resistance to such proposals.

again the basic incompatibility between a Western political party system and Thai bureaucratic politics. The proliferation of political parties (44) that contested the elections in January 1975, again were little more than personalized cliques—with the exception of the Democrat Party, which nonetheless was badly split between older moderates and younger radicals. The four political parties representing the former members of the old United Thai Peoples Party (UTPP) and still allied with Thai military interests were expected to win an easy combined majority. They represented conservative interests and perceptions shared by most Thai, they were heavily financed by military/business interests, and the Thai armed forces could be expected to vote as instructed by their commanders on orders from the top—presumably for the old UTPP politicians.

The expected outcome did not materialize; the traditional opposition, the Democrat Party, did better than expected, and a multitude of splinter parties bled further votes from the old-line conservatives. The conservatives' unexpectedly poor showing can be laid to several factors—the public's disgust with the old regime and its familiar faces, the personality orientation of Thai politics which reduces issues and party identities to little consequence, and equally important, to the lack of strong, decisive leadership in the military. The then Army chief, Krit Siwara, never effectively marshalled his influence and the military vote behind any one party; the resulting spread of votes among the conservative parties gave the Democrats a strong plurality and first crack at forming a government.

But the split within the party and the uncompromising attitude of the radical wing proved its undoing. Seni Pramot, the leader of the Democrats, had to form a coalition acceptable to the armed forces or risk their reaction to a regime they deemed threatening to their interests. Seni was ultimately willing to compromise with the conservatives. But the composition of his Cabinet—which included technocrats and some younger politicians of a more progressive bent—the Democrats' proposals for substantial reforms, and the injudicious statements of some members of Seni's party eager for change and not anxious to compromise with the old guard, stiffened opposition from the

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military (and apparently from the King) and lost for their short-lived coalition government the crucial vote of confidence in the Assembly.

The Democrats' failure, and the subsequent maneuvering to form a viable coalition government and select an acceptable prime minister demonstrated Krit's power as king-maker, despite his earlier fumbling. Krit's hand was obvious in the back-room maneuvering that led to Seni's defeat. There is some reason to believe that Krit had come to an understanding with Khukrit on a coalition Cabinet led by Khukrit even before the election. The Democrats' victory obviously side-tracked any such plan, but only temporarily. Krit's influence over the selection of the present Cabinet was not absolute; compromises had to be made that were acceptable to the various parties in the coalition. But the ultimate composition largely represented the traditional conservative forces more acceptable to the military and more malleable to their influence.

Krit, nonetheless, was sensitive to the potential political repercussions from installing a government which so patently represented the old order, particularly in view of the Democrats' strong showing which indicated the voters desire for change. The selection of Khukrit Pramot for Prime Minister—a widely-respected journalist, author, political commentator, and restrained critic of the old regime—was expected to mitigate the disappointment of those seeking reform, though liberal students and intellectuals promptly accused him of selling out to reactionary interests.

III. POLITICAL FORCES IN THAILAND TODAY—HAS MUCH REALLY CHANGED?

A. The Leadership

The striking thing about the current Thai leadership—both in the government and in the opposition—is the familiarity of the faces. The brothers Pramot—Khukrit the Prime Minister, and Seni, the leader of the principal opposition party—established Thailand's first political parties and have been leading political figures since the war. Neither qualify as revolutionary firebrands; as "senior princes" in the extended royal family, they are a link between Thailand's conservative, aristocratic past and its tentative gropings toward representa-



Figure 4. Seni and Khukrit Pramot.

tive government in a more modern age. Although both Khukrit and Seni present themselves as "socialists," they are really moderate reformists who believe the Thai elite must show greater social responsibility.

Khukrit's relative liberalism stands out in a Cabinet that is otherwise overwhelmingly conservative and has strong links to past military regimes. The Cabinet is a coalition representing 18 parties—three of which are derivatives of the old United Thai Peoples Party, the one-time political vehicle of the Thanom/Praphat regime. Defense Minister Praman Adereksan, leader of the Thai Nation Party, is representative of that very group that long has dominated Thai politics. A retired major-general and extremely wealthy businessman, Praman belongs to the Phin-Phao clique of the 1947 Coup Group that installed Field Marshall Phibun Songkhram as dictator from 1948-1957. His brother-in-law, Foreign Minister Chatchai Chunawan, also a retired major-general and rich businessman, has a similar background. Cabinet members such as

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Praman clearly are not as interested in reform as they are in protecting their business interests and the traditional system that has served them so well. Yet Khukrit is a skillful manipulator. As Speaker of the interim Assembly he exercised remarkable control over a usually uncontrollable body; as Prime Minister he has lured and maintained the continuing support of most of the splinter parties; and he has successfully threatened and cajoled his Cabinet colleagues into going along with some progressive legislation. As widely respected and popular as Khukrit is, however, his power base is limited, and his survival depends primarily on his continued acceptability to the conservative establishment.

B. The Power Brokers

The Army. The Thai Army clearly remains the most powerful political force in the country, but for the moment, it is willing to remain in the background. The longevity of this tolerance of civilian government and how the public would react to an attempt to overthrow it, however, are basic questions underlying the nation's future political stability. The events of October 1973 revealed weaknesses in the military leadership and divisive splits in military unity, but the underlying power of the military establishment and its conservative allies and satellites was quickly reasserted in subsequent political developments and was a primary force in shaping the present government.

The military's political power is sustained through a combination of paternalism and patronage. As in other Thai hierarchical relationships, but even more intensely, subordinate troops and officers respond to the commander's sense of responsibility for their welfare with basically unquestioning loyalty. This disciplined following not only provides the threat of force in coup attempts, but in times of representative government, a disciplined voting bloc that (with proper planning) can be used to influence an election. The Thai military, in short, is as much a political party as a security force. It is, in fact, potentially the most disciplined and effective political party in the country, though less so than when under Praphat's firm leadership.

Since the 1932 revolution ending the absolute monarchy, a military career has been the path to national leadership, or at the least, to wealth and



Figure 5. Gen. Krit Siwara, recently retired military Commander-in-Chief.

influence. This path has traditionally led through the First Army and its First Division—the Bangkok garrison—which is in the prime location to stage a coup in the capital; the political proclivities and loyalties of that Division and Army are still of utmost importance. He who would launch a successful coup (or forestall one) must command the allegiance of the Bangkok forces. Retired (October 1975) Army Commander-in-Chief, Krit Siwara, for example, successively commanded the First Division and the First Army area on his way up the ladder, and reportedly has tried to maintain a coterie of friends and allies within the First Army.

Such loyalties are reinforced by the largesse a commander can dispense to his followers. The power of the military attracts wealth which in turn enhances and projects that power even further. Thailand is one country where one can truly speak of a dominant "military/industrial complex," albeit the driving force is derived from the military side and their partners more commercial than industrial. Senior military officers are extremely wealthy men and can use this wealth to both reinforce their subordinates' loyalty, and—under the present political system—to develop and support friendly political parties. Undoubtedly, this ability to manipulate the political system contributed to Krit's willingness to go along with the "democratic experiment."

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Nonetheless, many in the military are clearly unhappy with the situation; they view the civilian regime as weak and ineffectual and too easily swayed by "leftist" interest groups. They fear that the Assembly will use its authority to cut future military budgets and other prerequisites—actions which caused the demise of the parliament in 1971. Khukrit has shown considerable skill in assuaging the military's worries; his tough stand against labor and student radicals has been reassuring. But the potential for military intervention, though diminished, clearly has not disappeared.

The senior ranks of the Thai Army seem willing to support the new constitution, at least as long as a conservative government that does not threaten their interests remains in power. But the chance of a "Young Turk" movement emerging in the Thai Army cannot be completely dismissed, though it is highly unlikely. Junior and middle-grade officers in both the vital First and the Second Army areas have shown signs of discontent and restlessness—dissatisfied both with the new political system and with the top leadership of the Thai Army. They saw Krit and his successors as weak and ineffectual, too preoccupied with political maneuvering and neglectful of the military's needs. Such criticism of the political generals at the top was common in earlier regimes, and these complaints may have represented no more than the usual griping, although there are now extra ingredients to the familiar problem.

Weighing against such a development is the discipline and ingrained regard for hierarchical authority in the Thai Army. It is unlikely that a military coup attempt would develop without a general officer leading it. And while many senior officers share their juniors' concerns, there appears to be a consensus that the Army should not be directly responsible for the collapse of Thailand's "democratic experiment." They perceive that for all the concern over student and labor unrest and the growing radicalization of some opposition groups, there is significant public identification with and commitment to this constitution. It is not an after-the-fact rationalization of a power grab as past such documents have been, but a document drafted by a body representing a uniquely broad cross-section of Thai society amidst prolonged open debate. The politically active ele-

ment of Thai society would not casually accept its discard. Additionally, the King's role in establishing the new constitutional government gives the new structure extra prestige. The military is sensitive to the King's feelings and unlikely to move without at least his tacit approval. Moreover, many in the military believe that eventually the civilians will bring themselves down—as in the past—through ineptness, infighting, and inability to control radical unrest. When the situation has generated real public concern, they reason, the military *then* can move to take charge without widespread censure. Few envision a return to military dictatorship; many think that military rule through a cosmetic civilian regime a more feasible development. For the present, Krit and other senior commanders have attempted to reassure the more anxious dissidents in the ranks.

The King. King Phumiphon Adunyadet is an important factor in the Thai political equation. Although he has little formal political authority under the constitution, he commands considerable moral influence, and this was enhanced by his role in the events of 1973. The King has subsequently retreated to a far less active position—apparently concerned that his direct involvement in Thai politics would endanger the unique position of the monarchy—but his close ties with the current political and military leadership and the widespread respect and loyalty he enjoys throughout the country make him the most important unifying and stabilizing force in Thailand.

The King's subsequent disenchantment with the student activists and his tendency to ascribe their militancy to communist influence may have undermined the relationship and diluted his influence over the student movement. As public criticism of the monarchy is rare, it is difficult to assess the impact of the student's growing radicalism on their regard for the King. The position of at least one radical student leader was badly damaged by accusations that he was against the monarchy (a charge he vehemently denied), and it appears that most students still revere the King and would be influenced by his intervention. Disrespectful noises are heard among students and younger (US-trained) faculty, however, and may increase as the student movement continues its role as critic and adversary of the government.

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The King's continuing influence with the students may depend as much on his own flexibility and willingness to work to preserve his unique contact rather than be turned off by the extremism of a few. The King clearly has been shocked by the increasingly leftist coloring of the student activists—students he, as much as anyone, encouraged to "work for reform," encouragement that was clearly instrumental in the progression of events in 1973. Recent comments indicate that he now sees the students as a dangerous, disruptive force, determined to bring down the government and unwilling to compromise. Where the King has been the student activists' protector to some degree in the past, his present mood might, if not deliberately encourage, at least fail to restrain those elements in the Army eager to "suppress" the more militant student leaders. Student awareness of the King's tacit acceptance of such suppression would only further undermine his relationship with the student community, especially if even moderate dissent prompts military-inspired reprisals. His role as stabilizer and peacemaker would then be significantly undermined.

The King's reaction to the excesses of the student activists stems in part from his innate conservatism and intensely apprehensive view of the communist danger to Thailand (and to the monarchy). While the King has long pushed for moderate reforms, a

new constitution, and a return to representative government, he is disturbed by the sense of instability generated by the various political actors now testing their strength in the new situation, he is appalled by the signs of a growing left-wing movement, and he is fearful that a coalition government beset by infighting will be too weak to cope with the country's problems.

The King takes a more serious view of the communist insurgency than do his government or the military high command, and he has been a persistent if muted critic of the former government's less than dynamic counterinsurgency programs. He has been particularly critical of past regimes' overwhelming focus on a military response while neglecting the political and social aspects of the problem—an imbalance he has tried to address through numerous personally-sponsored programs. His criticism has extended to alleged shortcomings in the US military aid program; he apparently has had some influence on Thai requests. But there is no evidence that the King's views have had a significant impact on Thai security policies in the past or now. While Khukrit is close to the King and has been influenced by his views, he has little direct involvement in the actual development of national policy, which is not always pleasing to the throne.

Indeed, the King—despite the potential for considerably more influence—seems determined to re-



Figure 6. His Majesty the King firing an M-16 as the Queen looks on.

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main aloof from the political fray. While he feels a strong sense of paternalistic responsibility for his people's welfare—through personally sponsored development projects and relief operations, for example—and his peripatetic activities around the country meet outpourings of loyalty and affection, he appears to feel his position too insecure to risk in political confrontations with the ruling elite. His assumption of the throne when the monarchy's prestige was at a low ebb, the hostility of the government then which kept him isolated from the people, and his apparent conviction that his older brother's death was a political assassination undoubtedly all reinforce this insecurity.

In any case, a sustained involvement in the political arena probably would weaken the King's image as a detached father-figure above the fray, interested only in the nation's welfare and untainted by political interests. As it is, the King retains the potential for effective intervention in an immediate, short-term crisis and could again be valuable in defusing a dangerous confrontation.

The King is a relatively young man—47—and his assassination is not considered very likely. He travels regularly—albeit armed and guarded—in areas of marginal security, the assumption apparently being that neither the communists nor Muslim dissidents would try to kill him. A very serious illness last year raised the always real chance, however, he could die or be incapacitated unexpectedly.

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The Civilian Bureaucracy: a Stronger Voice in Foreign Policy. The civilian bureaucracy is clearly speaking with a stronger voice these days—its long subordination to military policy-makers replaced with an opportunity to seize the initiative and, in some cases, to press for long advocated changes. The Ministry of Interior, for example, was General Praphat's personal political fiefdom for 16 years. The most important department of the government in that its operations (the administration of local government, the police, urban planning, community development, etc.) impact on the lives of virtually every Thai, is now under civilian direction. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on the other hand, has all along been headed by a civilian,

most notably for many years by the outspoken Thanat Khoman, who nonetheless had little impact on the regime's foreign policy decisions. Now, the advent of civilian government has breathed new life into the MFA and brought increased influence to more reform-minded elements within the ministry.

The decision to suspend Indian Ocean reconnaissance flights from U-Tapao was an early example of MFA determination to seize the initiative in Thai foreign policy. Much of the force behind Thailand's openings to the PRC and more cautious approach to North Vietnam has come from an aggressive younger element in the ministry, whose principal spokesman is Anan Panyarachun, Thailand's recent Ambassador to the US and the UN and now under-secretary of the ministry.

Their views to some extent reflect the influence of former Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman (Anan was once Thanat's private secretary), who has long argued for a general loosening of ties to the US and a shift to a more neutral foreign policy. Anan and his like-minded colleagues have concluded that the American alliance cannot be relied on to assure Thailand's security and that therefore the country must come to terms with the new realities of the situation—detente, a diminished American interest in Southeast Asia, and the lessened appropriateness of military power for achieving political goals.

Moreover, although this group is not anti-American—it advocates the preservative of close political ties—its members feel that the relationship in the past has been more advantageous to American interests than to Thailand's and in the future ought to reflect a more "equal" and mutually beneficial relationship. Underlying these views is strong residual resentment of Washington's ability to by-pass the MFA in the past and deal directly with the military leadership: their criticism particularly focused on the ad hoc and ambiguous arrangements that gave the US unusual latitude. Compelling the Americans to go through normal diplomatic channels has become part of the ministry's bureaucratic struggle to wrest control of the conduct of Thai foreign policy away from the military leadership, as well as an effort to signal the end of an era when the US could take Thailand's concurrence in American actions for granted. The adverse Thai reaction to the use of Thai bases in the Mayaguez

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incident without prior consultation highlighted this sensitivity, which extends well beyond MFA.

The foreign office position is not without its challengers. As the shock of South Vietnam's collapse has worn off, the Thai government's eagerness to launch new foreign policy initiatives has been replaced by a far more cautious attitude. The senior military leadership is still comfortable with the old understandings and holds a much more cautious view of the utility of attempting to reach an accommodation with Thailand's communist neighbors. The military are not oblivious to the changing world around them, however. Faith in the American ally, already weakened by disappointment in the military aid program, was badly shaken by the collapse of South Vietnam. But while the Thai military see North Vietnam as a greater threat now, they also expect less help from the US in meeting that threat, and thus have some appreciation of the need for diplomatic maneuvering. At the same time, they are anxious to preserve as close a relationship with the US as possible, and are particularly concerned that the government's efforts to establish a more "independent" posture may lead to diminished US military aid.

The conservative coloring of the present government is a further restraint on any dramatic shift in Thai foreign policy. Its caution particularly has been reflected in the deliberate pace of talks with Hanoi. The Cabinet's greater judiciousness—in spite of MFA urging for a faster pace of change—also reflects the influence of the National Security Council staff's recommendations where policies with security implications are concerned.* In the face of an unwieldy and fractious coalition Cabinet, Khukrit has turned increasingly to the NSC for studies and policy recommendations. In one such study, for example, the NSC refuted the MFA's contention that US reconnaissance flights over the Indian Ocean should be suspended before Khukrit's visit to China as they were a potential stumbling block in negotiations with the PRC. The NSC's opposing view was accepted by the Cabinet, which decided to take no action against the flights. Nonetheless, the foreign office is playing a more

*The Thai NSC includes the Prime Minister, Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs, and the Armed Services chiefs. The NSC staff is a permanent civil service body staffed by careerists.

decisive role in formulating and implementing Thai foreign policy—a role that is likely to become more significant if civilian rule is maintained and as non-military issues gain increasing priority.

C. Emerging Interest Groups: The Development of Protest Politics

The idea of structural pressure groups outside the official bureaucracy is alien to the Thai. But the rising level of political consciousness has generated growing political activity among students, labor, and farmers. As is the case with Thai political parties, these protest groups have tended to be personalized followings behind a dynamic leader—often competing with each other, but capable of coalescing briefly around a particular issue. Since the fall of the Thanom regime, the more visible activists have grown increasingly leftist and now form the core of the emerging radical movement in Thai politics. While the protest movement has attracted the interest of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), the party's long ideological preoccupation with peasant insurgency has left the Thai communists in the position of belatedly trying to associate with movements whose direction they do not control and whose internal workings they do not really understand.

The Students. Unlike many Asian countries where student activists have been catalysts for political change, the student community in Thailand has been relatively quiescent until recently. This passivity reflected the apolitical sentiments of their middle-class background, their cultural inoculation against individual dissent, and the underlying fear not only of reprisals from the well-entrenched military regime, but of being dismissed and ignored as ineffectual eccentrics. The university training—with its emphasis on learning by rote with little debate or discussion—did not generally encourage the questioning that breeds political opposition but tended instead to encourage a bureaucratic mentality.* Moreover, most students aspired to a career

*Thammasat University, one of the two oldest in the country, is something of an exception. It has a tradition of political activity inspired by its early association with Pridi Phanomyong, the premier civilian member of the 1932 coup group, and still leans toward more forceful confrontation than its more prestigious rival, Chulalongkorn University.

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within the government bureaucracy and were not inclined to challenge that bureaucracy's prerogatives.

Thailand's changing environment undoubtedly has encouraged the recent growth of student activism. The religious and social values that emphasized the maintenance of social order and a certain detachment from worldly concerns have been diluted by secular education, urbanization, and growing industrialization. The changing value system, with its greater orientation toward materialistic concerns, is especially prevalent in the Thai middle class, the source of most university students. (The very rich elite send their children abroad.) At the same time, the enormous growth in university and vocational school enrollment of the last decade put a greater strain on a limited job market, a strain that grew even more pronounced as the economy sagged in the early 1970s.

Changes in the students' political environment coincided with their growing frustrations over finding careers commensurate with their educational backgrounds and aspirations. A small group of professors had been urging more responsive government for years. Those who studied in the US in the late 1960s were undoubtedly influenced by both the political ideals and student activism they found there. Their return to Thailand as lecturers in the universities had an enormous impact on the student movement. While student interest in greater individual opportunity and a more liberal political atmosphere was growing, however, the regime was moving in the other direction—abandoning the then current constitution (adopted in 1968) and reverting to martial law. The gulf between the two groups could only grow wider.

Ironically, the military regime was relatively tolerant of the students' political protests, and this tolerance undoubtedly contributed to the growing boldness of the student movement. Protest activity initially centered around university-related issues. Beginning in the late 1960s, students began to agitate against government control of the universities.* The universities (and the government) repeatedly gave way to student demands for reforms in en-

* Thai universities are publicly financed and until the last few years, often had senior military officers as university chancellors, symbolic of the government's tight control over curriculum and faculty.

trance requirements, examinations, administrative management, and for upgrading colleges and teacher-training schools to fully-accredited universities. When the students turned to national issues, such as Japanese economic infiltration (a popular target) or the more controversial case of the government's efforts to control the judiciary, the activities were not only tolerated by the government, but often, by generating broader support outside the student community, successful.

Student success in bringing down the government in the October uprising was more the result of a blending of several factors—than of the inherent strength of the student movement. Growing student militancy had been encouraged by earlier successes; their issue was made popular by the increasing disgust with the Thai leadership (particularly with Narong and his father-in-law, Praphat); the military establishment was reluctant to support that leadership; and finally, the regime's overreaction led to bloodshed and the King's decision that Thanom and Praphat had to go. Nevertheless, October 1973 was a dramatic demonstration of the students' political impact when coalesced around a popular issue.

Student power is a transitory phenomenon, however. The student movement reflects a basic characteristic of other Thai political forces—a shifting plethora of personalized cliques, which only occasionally coalesce around an issue. The constant bickering and infighting among student leaders and factions weakens the students' effectiveness, while the growing radicalism of some of the student activists has damaged their image in the public's eye. Yesterdays' heroes are today's nuisances. But student capacities for exerting significant pressure on the government cannot be dismissed and have been demonstrated forcefully if inconstantly since the triumphant days of October 1973. For example, ex-Prime Minister Thanom Kittakachorn's return to Thailand to attend his dying father—a return obviously sanctioned by the government, and probably by the King—immediately aroused student passions to the point where the government felt it necessary to hustle Thanom quickly back out of the country.

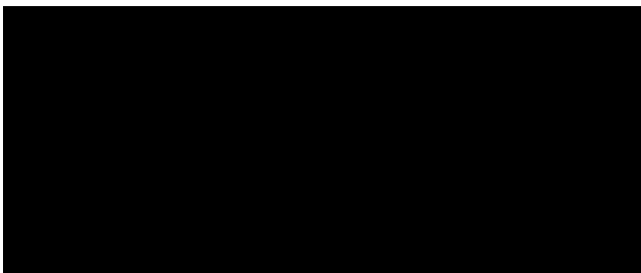
The students are most effective when they can play on Thai nationalism or on real or imagined

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threats to the new democratic effort. Thus, they can bring pressure to bear in their role as "watch-dogs" of the new constitutional process and as monitors of official performance. Both the interim government under Sanya and the briefly-tenured administration of Seni Pramot were particularly sensitive to pressure from the students, academia, and the media. This sensitivity and their own nationalistic sentiments were reflected, for example, in a Cabinet decision to withdraw tin mining concessions from the Dutch-American-Thailand Exploration and Mining Company, Ltd. (TEMCO), a decision that then Prime Minister Seni later admitted was against his better judgment (for the effect it would have on attracting foreign investment) but felt had to be made in the face of an aggressive student and media campaign.

The military, whose attitude toward the students is increasingly hostile, nonetheless is not insensitive to the public opinion that can be focused by student protests. The bad publicity generated by student allegations of military atrocities in northern Thailand in 1970-1971—and made a cause celebre by student protests in January 1975—has added to the Army's reluctance to wage an aggressive campaign against the communist guerrillas. There is a natural hostility between the students and the conservative military establishment which views them as irresponsible radicals whose attempts to generate unrest endanger the country. But at the same time, the military and police are still unsettled by the violence and bloodshed of the October uprising, and they know there would be strong public feeling against open police brutality against student demonstrators, who are, after all, the children of the Thai elite.



While threats of reprisal have certainly put a damper on student eagerness for confrontation, there is also still a basic opposition to political violence, which is a restraint on the methods the students are willing to use. Despite their determina-

tion to rid Thailand of the "evil trio"—Thanom, Praphat, and Narong—and the surprised delight with their success, the more moderate university activists were disturbed by the bloodshed that attended the October uprising.* While some of the more radical students might be inclined to encourage violent political tactics, they would be hard pressed to persuade many others to go along—unless it were in response to a military coup that threw aside constitutional government. Such an act would almost certainly inflame student passions and generate sustained opposition to the regime.

The vocational students are an exception, and have a well-deserved reputation for irresponsible rowdiness.** The violence of the October uprising was generated largely by vocational students, who set fire to police stations and were eager to do battle with police and military personnel—a fact that hurt the public image of the entire student movement. Their coalescence with the university student movement was short-lived; the former allies are now adversaries.

Conservative military leaders have coopted vocational students for counter-demonstrations against their more radical university counterparts—playing not on strongly-held conservative views as much as on the students' love of a good "rumble." The vocational students are less moved by a desire to shake the system than by a more parochial interest in persuading the government to upgrade the quality and status of their particular educational cone—one whose neglect and secondary status not only contributes to the resentment and bitterness of these students, but provides insufficient preparation for Thailand's growing need for technically-qualified people. As long as the vocational students remain a frustrated, volatile and violence-prone group, they can easily be used by others as a sparking point for more widespread unrest.

Although the fragmentation of the student movement has lessened its impact, it clearly continues to play an influential role in Thai politics. Student activists have gained a certain legitimacy that

*Following Thai custom, a number of student leaders went into a period of religious retreat as monks to atone for the deaths.

**The vocational schools, which are often called engineering colleges, are actually closer to American technical high schools, and their students come from a less advantaged social background than the average Thai university student.

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allows them to demand reform. Their effectiveness at any time, however, depends on the degree of student unity and public support behind the issue at hand. Nationalistic (read: anti-foreign) feelings continue to be a strong force behind student protests, and often translates into anti-American campaigns. As long as US military forces remain in Thailand, they are a natural target for student protest, but the already strong theme of *economic imperialism* (or "stealing Thailand's natural resources") seems to be growing into an even more nettlesome problem. The students frequently evoke socialism as the solution to socio-economic inequities in Thai society, but the common Thai concept of socialism is neither Marxist nor Fabian but more a fuzzy and less than radical image of improved living standards, more rational labor laws, and some protection for the farmers from the often rapacious Chinese middlemen who blatantly exploit them. It is a viewpoint shared by the moderate politicians and an increasing number of more enlightened members of the older elite, including the Prime Minister.

Increasing communist penetration is probably an inevitable development. Communist propaganda already indicates that the communists see some potential for influence in the emerging urban political organization. The students, with their impatience with the system, their eagerness for change, and their poorly informed and ill-developed knowledge of communist philosophies and systems, are vulnerable to more radical arguments. Many of Bangkok's university students are Sino-Thai. They have shown an increasing interest in learning about the PRC—a natural reflection of pride in their cultural heritage, but also a sentiment that might prove exploitable.

Labor. Organized labor has a long way to go before it will be a significant political force in Thailand, despite major gains in the last few years. Union organization is in an infant stage; the labor movement simply has neither the size nor cohesion to be a major power broker nor even an effective political instrument for others to manipulate. Given the small base and relatively slow pace of industrial development in Thailand, it probably will be some years before labor can gain that strength, even presuming that a renewal of dictatorial or semi-dictatorial government does not add further

restraints. Labor's cohesion is undermined not only by a conservative/radical split, but by the personalized factionalism that colors most groups in Thailand.

The labor movement got its initial boost while Thanom and company were still in business. The Labor Law of 1972 established the workers' right to organize (unions had been banned in 1958) a minimum wage, and a Workman's Compensation Fund which was considered the first step toward an eventual social security system. National unions were still prohibited—the regime (and the conservatives today) saw them as a potential weapon for left-wing radicals and communists—but the 1972 law permitted the organization of Workers' Associations for a single company or for a single industry in a single province. The law was barely on the books when labor unrest began to percolate—emerging as a wave of strikes in 1973 that began before the October coup and accelerated massively afterward.

The new labor law unquestionably encouraged the workers to test their new rights, but it also coincided with a sudden upsurge of serious inflation and other attendant economic problems that bore down heavily on the urban workers. A strike in May 1973 at the Thailand Steelworks set the tone for future labor protests—short, non-violent, with public and media sympathy, and successful. The strikers clearly had legitimate grievances and carefully listed the management's violations of the Labor Law. Their success in winning redress in what was viewed as a test case had a bandwagon effect on labor protest activity, which ironically exploded into hundreds of strikes *after* the military regime was replaced by a government obviously more sympathetic to the urban workers' needs. While the strikes were an indication of labor frustration over poor working conditions, low wages, and blatant violations of the labor law, they were not a reflection of an organized, viable labor movement. Virtually all of the walk-outs were wild-cat strikes, opposed by the leaders of the labor organizations. The strike activity tapered off in 1974.

Much of labor's toothlessness is due to inexperience and weak organization—conditions that will change over time. The prospects for more effective unions improved when the Labor Law was revised to allow labor organization on a national basis

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and to further liberalize the grounds for legal strikes. Although the labor movement is attracting some communist interest, labor's basic resistance to political manipulation may not be easily shaken. The workers in general do not feel they are adequately represented by the acknowledged labor leaders, be they conservative or radical. Both types of union leaders tend to hold outside interests as political agitators or as allies of management above the workers' problems, and in recent years, at least, workers have found that they could gain their demands without union assistance.

On the other hand, the Khukrit regime's tough reaction to militant activity and labor's fears of management retaliation are obvious factors in most workers' hesitancy to adopt more aggressive tactics. Underlying these motives is the basic conservatism of the average Thai worker who wants to improve his condition but does not want to overthrow the system. Basically, he believes in the system and has faith in the paternalistic relationship between management and workers. His demands are based on his understanding of management's paternalistic responsibilities toward him—an understanding widely shared by the public and the government. The radical militants insinuate a threat to institutions the workers still identify with—the King, religion, the established social order—and which offends the beliefs of people who still reflect their rural origins. Serious economic hardship could undermine this acceptance of the system, but as long as the government is reasonably responsive to labor's demands, protest activity is likely to remain oriented around job-related, rather than political, issues.

The Farmers. Agriculture is the backbone of the Thai economy, the leading occupation (75 percent of the work force), and the major foreign exchange earner. Thailand has benefited from high agricultural export prices which have kept ahead of rising import prices (on products such as oil) and given Thailand a favorable balance of payments over the last two years. The rise in agricultural production and prices gave Thai farmers their highest returns on record last year, but their standard of living remains dramatically lower than that of their urban compatriots—a problem recognized by successive regimes but rarely matched by effective remedial action.

For several years, however, there has been an undercurrent of concern that significant dissatisfaction and unrest might be growing among the rural communities—some 80 percent of the country's population, the traditional bedrock of the nation's conservatism and stability, and the primary target of communist organizers. There has long been a persistent insurgency along Thailand's borders in the north and northeast and in several areas in the south—areas whose populace are poor and generally neglected by the government. Bangkok has never felt the insurgency a serious enough threat to make a determined effort to eradicate it; the insurgency was not spreading, and it could be rationalized as something affecting only the politically-impotent minorities which make up the bulk of the border dwellers. It was assumed that the "real" Thai, loyal to the King and inculcated with Buddhist teaching, would reject such subversive influence. Communist victories in Indo-China have made this a more sensitive issue—raising fears in Bangkok that with greater external support, the insurgency could break out of its border enclaves and penetrate the farm communities of the Central Plain, whose political allegiance is of special concern to the government in Bangkok. Even those Thai who see the insurgent threat as primarily a domestic problem, not easily manipulated by Hanoi, are concerned by the implications of long neglect, the stirrings of dissatisfied awareness, and the beginnings of political organization among the farmers.

Land tenancy problems in the Central Plain have provoked recent demonstrations in Bangkok. While such protests are not unprecedented (there is a long tradition of rural petitioners coming to the capital to seek redress from the king, and in more recent history, from the prime minister), in the supercharged political atmosphere of Bangkok since October 1973, they added a temporary note of urgency to concerns about rural unrest.* The current tenancy problem in the Central Plains was

*According to a 1969-1969 survey, only 40.7 percent of the farmers in the Central Plain own their own land, in contrast to over 80 percent in the north and south and over 90 percent in the northeast. These statistics are somewhat misleading, however; the holdings are small and often fragmented, and the farmers often are concurrently working as tenants on larger pieces. Land titles are often confusing or carry restrictions as to transfer, sale, and inheritance.

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initially provoked by low rice prices in the early 1970s followed by a poor crop in 1972, resulting in the loss of many small holdings to the money-lenders. Student activists became aware of the farmers' plight in the spring of 1974 when students went out to the rural communities to carry the word about the constitution and the new political freedoms. Student/farmer agitation subsequently led to the appointment of government arbitration committees by the Sanya government to investigate the methods of land acquisition. Subsequent pressure on the landlords did shake loose new leases and some redress of the farmers' grievances. The immediate problem more or less resolved itself—at least temporarily—when farm prices rose again. At its worst, it apparently reflected only scattered and isolated cases and not a widespread problem.

Khukrit recently forced through the Tambon program legislation that will provide modest amounts of development assistance to the villagers. But basic problems of insufficient irrigation, the lack of rural credit facilities that would free the farmer from the usurious moneylenders, and artificially restrained prices* remain largely untouched. It has always been more expedient politically to keep rice prices low for the urban dweller at the farmer's expense—a situation not likely to change very soon. Given the conservative make-up of the

public interest, at which point—after long ignoring the problem—the government frequently gives in to the demonstrators' demands with all sorts of promises, most of which will never be fulfilled. But interest groups have concluded that agitation politics are the only way to force concessions, and they will return to the streets of the capital with their future problems.

Although government leaders mutter about "communist agitators" provoking such protests, the successive civilian governments since October 1973 have shown a willingness, and indeed a certain flair, for the kind of populist politics involved in soothing the farmers' discontent, for example (although they show less patience with anyone thought "leftist"). And perhaps in Thai society, such personalized government is preferable to more institutionalized politics and, at this stage of their development, still possible. Whether such methods can continue much longer with the growing complexity of problems facing Thailand is questionable.

The Right Responds. The growth of organized political protest has not been welcome to conservative circles. The arranged harassment of student agitators gave a taste of growing conservative reaction and apparent determination to intimidate those trying to organize (and in some cases, to radicalize) a political force among the peasantry. Between

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Protest politics are a disruptive factor in Thailand's still fragile effort to develop representative government, but such protest activities are an almost inevitable by-product of the Thai system. Official decision-making is highly centralized. Local problems—such as land tenancy issues—usually have to reach Bangkok before they are settled, and then, usually by Cabinet action rather than in the ministry. Remedial action is often taken only after demonstrations have whipped up confrontation and

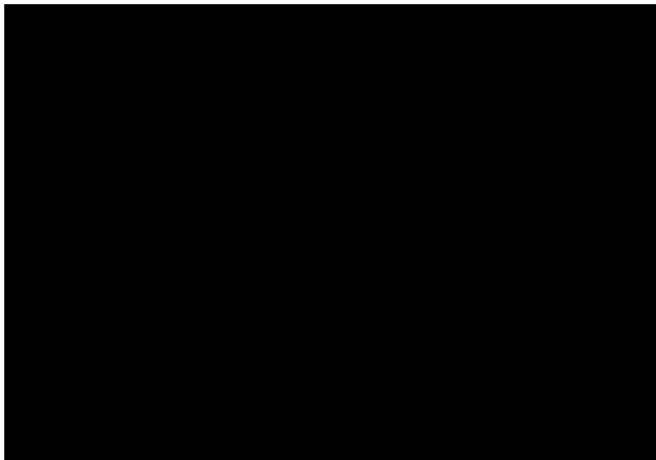
*For example, the government imposes an export premium—a tax—on rice sales abroad. To make up the difference, merchants buy rice from the farmers at well below world market prices.

Such intimidation is a restraining factor on dissent, but the see-saw activity of dissent and intimidation threatens to accentuate political polarization, laying the groundwork for a more dramatic and divisive impact on Thai politics.

Already, law and order has become a political issue of increasing concern. While the focal point of the issue is crime, it nonetheless has contributed to the public's aversion to the violence often attendant to protest politics. An undoubted spinoff

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Philippine society, with over a generation of democratic experience behind it, accepted martial law with general equanimity, largely because crime and violence had become intolerable, and a more authoritarian regime, while stripping away personal rights, seemed to offer greater personal security. In Thailand, there is still considerable skepticism that any democratic government can effectively govern. The unchecked growth of violence—be it inspired by economic need or political ideology—can only increase the likelihood of the re-introduction of an authoritarian regime.

IV. WHAT LIES AHEAD?

The new political structure now appears to be shaking down. The sense of drift and fragility that permeated the Sanya caretaker regime and the early months of Khukrit's administration—exacerbated by the shock of Indo-China's sudden collapse—has begun to give way to an atmosphere of greater confidence and direction. Khukrit has emerged a much stronger political leader than was anticipated. His firmness toward the left, his skill at manipulating the Assembly, and his diplomatic adroitness in recent visits around Asia—particularly with the Chinese leaders—have enhanced his stature. In forcing at least some reforms—such as the Tambon project for rural development—past a



Figure 7. Prime Minister Khukrit Pramot.

conservative cabinet and through the Assembly, he is proving to be something of a bridge between the die-hard conservatives and the more reform-minded centrists. There is no obvious alternative as broadly acceptable as Khukrit—a situation that should restrain the ambitions of other political leaders and reinforce Khukrit's hold on the prime ministership.

The incipient leftist movement is out of favor with the public and somewhat cowed—at least temporarily—by threats of retaliation by the military and police. Radical student leaders have backed away from confrontations with the government that could prove dangerous to themselves; a student-labor alliance has not been sustained; and the Khukrit regime has indicated a toughness and willingness to take firm measures with unruly political dissidents. This is not to say that protest politics will not continue, but there is likely to be a period of more caution and restraint than was

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**The population of Bangkok has increased too fast for the city's municipal services, transportation system, and available housing. If it maintains its current growth rate, the city will double in size in the next 12-15 years.

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seen in the heady months following the Thanom regime's demise.

The military remain the most skeptical of the new system and are prepared to reinsert themselves in a stronger role if conditions seriously degenerate. A serious outbreak of labor or student unrest, especially if leading to prolonged violence; the fall of the government through ambitious political maneuvering; a suddenly intransigent and uncontrollable parliament; a serious threat from North Vietnam—any such event would raise the odds for a military coup or the imposition of martial law. Even in a relatively calm situation, one cannot completely discount the ambitions of military officers impatient with diminished power. General Krit's retirement from the Army raises a question about its continuing passivity. His successor as Army Chief of Staff, General Bunchai Bamrungphong, shows a less definite commitment to preserving a democratic system and his leadership is weak. With the removal of Krit's restraining influence, the Army may become more susceptible to manipulation by reactionary elements.

The military's demonstrated ability to protect its interests through alliances within the political system argues, however, for their continuing acceptance of an indirect role. The apparent dearth of dynamic leaders on the horizon and the current sentiment within the officer corps for more professional leadership less involved with personal political maneuvering should further reinforce the present disinclination to resume the burdens of national leadership. Another military coup would not be accepted without protest except under the most pressing circumstances. The students, in particular, would probably react violently, and while they could be easily subdued, the prospects of a bloody confrontation with Thai students would be a strongly dissuasive factor.

Nonetheless, despite good prospects for a period of relative stability, any prediction as to the longevity of parliamentary government is hazardous. The underlying principles of representative government remain alien to most Thai, and one must question whether the institutions and methods of democratic government can be preserved over the long run when there is little basic commitment to the conceptual underpinnings. There is still widespread skepticism that democratic government can

deal effectively with Thailand's problems. Many Thai look back with nostalgia on the placid and predictable days under Marshall Sarit, but this really reflects a longing for an era when Thailand's problems seemed simpler. As the complexities of Thailand's problems grow, so will impatience with debate and protest; arguments will be heard for firm, decisive, and more authoritarian leadership.

But not for a return to a narrowly-based military oligarchy. Despite the obvious discomfort with the free-wheeling aspects of Western democracy and the continuing force of an elitist/paternalistic outlook, one cannot dismiss the inexorable pressure for a more open system that is flexible enough to adjust to changing conditions. Former military regimes justified their monopoly of power in terms of national security—an argument already less persuasive and one that should continue to take a back seat to the increasing emphasis on social and economic reform. The days when a few generals could run the country, for personal profit have given way to more complicated demands on the government that require the broader participation of civilian technocrats in the decision-making process. The civilians within the Thai elite have long considered themselves far more qualified to run the government than the more narrowly-educated military. They resented being shunted aside by Thanom and Praphat; they are enjoying their greater influence; and they would resist the reestablishment of a military dictatorship that denied them an effective role. Thailand is likely to ease back into a more authoritarian system, but one in which civilian technocrats will come to play an increasingly important role.

Regardless of the formal structure of the government in the years ahead, moreover, it will have to respond in some fashion to pressures from the new elements that have entered the fringes of political activity. Student and labor activists, and other reformist elements in business, the intelligentsia and the new political parties have been energized by the reintroduction of parliamentary government. While their influence probably will remain marginal for a long time, they will resist foreclosure and will be a continuing prick in the government's side.

Economic problems may prove in time to be the principal catalyst of more basic and disruptive changes in the Thai political fabric unless the

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government can effect some basic economic reforms to redistribute income more fairly. It will be difficult to make significant headway toward economic reform in the face of the well-entrenched vested interests of the Thai elite. The government will attract blame for problems generated by international economic ills beyond its control. Urban-rural competition over food prices will no doubt intensify with the farmers continuing to get the short end of it—and the persistence of rural poverty, the gap between those conditions and urban standards and the farmers' growing cognizance of their neglect can only stimulate frustrations with the existing political process.

But as yet there are no signs that serious unraveling of the traditional political fabric has begun. Thailand remains a deeply conservative society, and its problems are still within manageable bounds. Despite the obvious pressures for change that were growing in Thai society, the events of October 1973 were in many ways a fluke and one that did not change the basic ingredients of power in Thai political life. There are now new trends in motion, but Thai society has demonstrated a remarkable resilience under pressures of change and an ability to absorb new forces in a fashion that has modified their disruptive impact. While some of those impatient with the pace of change will contribute to a growing radical element, they are likely to remain more of a nuisance than a serious threat for some years for lack of any significant power base. Nonetheless, there is a general consensus in Thailand that some adjustments must be made—the clock cannot be turned back—and even the established elements of political power must accept new attitudes and new restraints.

In sum, Thailand is something of a paradigm of a society in transition. It cannot retreat to the old system of military rule that was demonstrably unable to cope with the growing complexity of problems facing Thailand, and yet the country's conservative ruling establishment is not prepared to open up the political system too far. Their efforts to find a compromise that is both compatible with the bedrock of Thai tradition yet sufficiently responsive to the pressures from new problems and new political forces now beginning to emerge undoubtedly will be buffeted by periodic turbulence as the parameters of the compromise are explored.

The coming years will be a test of the basic cohesion of Thai society and of its traditional ability to adapt in the face of change.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE US

The era when the US could take Thailand for granted is over, and the reintroduction of a civilian government obliges changes in methods of doing business with the Thai. The easy access to a few key military leaders who could make quick decisions relatively insulated from political pressures has given way to more tedious and often frustrating approaches through lengthier bureaucratic channels. Moreover, a government more exposed to public scrutiny and obliged to be more sensitive to public opinion (however narrowly represented it may be in Thailand) will be less accommodating.

But the basic shift in Thai foreign policy did not spring forth with the collapse of military rule but from Thai perceptions of a changing environment. Spurred by the implications of detente and the retrenchment of American power in Southeast Asia, the Thanom regime already was tentatively exploring ways to shift Thailand to a more neutral position when the events of 1973 brought it down. The reintroduction of a civilian government and the stimulus of communist victories in Indo-China have made the adjustment more explicit.

Despite the bureaucratic infighting for influence and arguments over the degree and pace of change, there appears to be a rough consensus on the need to move to a more neutral international position—cultivating relations with China (now viewed by the Thai as the primary power in Southeast Asia) as a counterweight to Hanoi, while maintaining close political ties to the US. At the same time, the Thai are anxious to develop the effectiveness of ASEAN and through ASEAN to promote its goal of a zone of neutrality for the area. Clearly, the reformist element in the MFA are impatient with the slow pace of Thailand's adjustment—an adjustment they feel is long overdue in any event. The military and the conservative political leaders, on the other hand, would prefer to move more slowly and cautiously. But the direction and goals of Thai foreign policy are generally agreed upon. In view of those shared perceptions of Thailand's vulnerability and needs, it seems likely that any government in the near future, including a military regime,

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Figure 8. Mao Tse-tung greets Khukrit in Peking.

should one replace the present structure, will be more demanding of a greater quid pro quo in its future dealings with the US and less willing to place overwhelming reliance on a close bilateral relationship.

In practical terms, this suggests a more independent and sometimes adversary position in international forums, such as the UN, as Thailand seeks to dissolve the image of client-state and assume a protective coloring more acceptable to the communist neighbors with whom she must now coexist. Regional relations will take increasing priority. Moreover, with the diminished importance of the military alliance, economic problems undoubtedly will become the more prevalent issues in Bangkok's relations with the US.

This is particularly true in that Thailand's economic growth has relied largely on foreign investment rather than on foreign aid, and American investors have been major participants. Now this investment has significantly slowed—investors made more cautious by the uncertainties of Thailand's political future and by the prolonged absence of a definitive official policy toward foreign investment. The TEMCO case highlighted a growing aspect of Thai nationalism that is unsettling to prospective foreign investors—an emotional rejection of foreign investment as pirating Thailand's resources. This sentiment is not held exclusively by the left. At least one provincial governor as well

as the conservative and Oxford-educated military commander for southern Thailand, General San, have expressed the view that Thailand's resources must be protected from excessive foreign exploitation. A more restrained reflection of Thai feelings was expressed in a recent editorial of the Bangkok Bank's *Monthly Review*, which argued that while Thailand needs foreign investment, the new political consciousness of the country demands stronger controls.

Indeed, Thailand's economic nationalism is not likely to assume extreme proportions. The ties between the business community (particularly the banking community) and the conservative and moderate parties and senior military establishment are intimate if not incestuous, and pressures from that quarter are bound to prevail over those from the more vocal protest groups. A civilian regime bidding for political support cannot escape some vulnerability to such pressure, however, and coupled with the nationalistic predilections of the bureaucracy and the leadership, the Thai are sure to be more restrictive as to the terms and areas of future foreign investment, even as they seek it.

The direction Thai foreign policy now seems to be taking could always veer, of course, if conditions changed. If, for example, there were a significant upswing in Thailand's persistent but still narrowly contained insurgency as the result of dramatically-increased foreign support, the argu-

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ments for maintaining a more intimate alliance with the US would be more compelling. The military undoubtedly would demand a more decisive role either within the constitutional parameters or by casting them aside. Even under these circumstances, however, if the American response were not reassuring, the Thai government—be it civilian or military, democratic or authoritarian—would probably begin to more earnestly seek accommodations with Hanoi and even closer ties with other great powers.

At this time, however, this scenario does not appear likely to develop in the near future. Hanoi's problems at home seem to be absorbing most of its energies, and its diplomatic tones suggest some desire for a cooling off period for activities outside its borders. Thai political developments and the policies growing out of them are more likely to be governed by domestic pressures than by threatening external exigencies and their march toward more neutral ground a measured pace rather than a panicky rout.

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